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ABSTRACT

Described are techniques teachers can use to help children learn the language and strategies important to positive peer interaction. These techniques include observation of students, building classroom order from rules formulated by students, teacher intervention to teach alternative ways of solving disputes, and dramatization of problematic situations. Positive peer interaction evolves slowly, but once the children have the language skills and strategies necessary for positive interaction, they have a tool for communicating and for learning. (RH)

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# POSITIVE PEER INTERACTION

by

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Peer interaction for learning, positive relationships among children, the ability of a child to relate to his peers and to all human beings in a manner that will allow him to grow in his understanding of himself and of others--teachers know how essential this is for all children. When there is more than one child in a room there will always be interaction of some kind. The challenge for the teacher is to enable the child to make those relationships helpful and constructive. The problem confronting the teacher is to enable students to learn the skills needed for positive interactions. A child who can express his ideas and feelings

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to his peers will achieve more success academically than the child who is constantly fighting or the one who is perpetually intimidated.

Too often teachers expect children to take turns, to be fair, and to be polite because they are told to be. "It isn't nice to hit your friend." "The children in this class always remember to say, 'please and thank you.'" "I (the teacher) am disappointed in the way that you are behaving." "Give Agnes a fair share of the blocks, Jimmy. You have more than your share."

Children obey these commands because they want to please the teacher. They know that "being good" means that they are to do what the teacher tells them to do. They will do what she tells them--while she is standing there, while she is in the room. However, the teacher's rules--rules that are dictated and are not internalized--leave the room when the teacher does. They are like the learning that Constance Kamii described as leaf-pasting activities. They stick as long as the adult is there to apply the glue. The moment the authority figure leaves, the learning--the teacher's rules--drop off and are blown away, leaving the child with nothing but his physical reactions when confronted with an obstacle.

Teachers--those who feel that children will only learn if they do the telling and showing--should read no farther. If the teacher must hold tightly to the role of the authority figure in order to fill the empty-vessel (student) with knowledge, the remainder of this article will not be

understood. Peer interaction--positive peer interaction for learning--cannot be achieved by telling a child what to do. He must learn this by himself.

Teachers--those who understand teaching as a means to help the helpless, small, innocent child who enters school for the first time--must look somewhere else for ideas. The teacher--the one who must have perfection in all things pertaining to education and who feels that mastery and rote learning are essential part to education--will fail. This will not fit her teaching style.

Teachers who feel that children are human beings who have a different view of the world from that of the adult and who are willing to learn along with the children will be rewarded. The satisfaction that comes from helping young children grow in their ability to appreciate themselves and to value others is tremendous. Guiding children toward an understanding of their worth and toward a perception that others are, also, important requires patience and knowledge about the general characteristics of the levels of development--physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Much of this knowledge comes from the children themselves. The rest can be found in college courses, workshops, and journals.

The first step begins when the teacher is ready to stop talking and to begin observing the children, to take the time to listen to the words they are using, to make an ernest attempt to understand their feelings, and to question what the children mean when something is not obvious. They want

to share their ideas and are anxious to share their thinking with the teacher. (This is not the usual reaction they are conditioned to receive from adults. The teacher may find some children confused by the interest of the teacher in what they are thinking.)

The next step is to begin considering rules--rules that will facilitate learning and create a more stable atmosphere in the classroom. During class meeting times (circle time) the teacher suggests that the classroom would be a more pleasant place if there were less talking. The students are asked to contribute their ideas for ways to improve the management of the classroom. As the rules evolve, the teacher writes them down verbatim. (This is helpful to children who have had little previous home experience with reading and writing.) The rules are read and re-read to be sure everyone knows what they are. These are the children's rules--not those made by the teacher. She acted, only, as a means to record them on paper.

The rules are posted for all to read. They are re-read each day for awhile. They are revised as needed. Some rules may be deleted--if the class decides to do so. These rules establish guidelines for behavior. The teacher follows the same rules as the students. (Fair rules are made for the benefit of everyone in the classroom--that includes the teacher.)

In order to reinforce the concept of rules, older students may be recruited, and/or teaching-aides and parents may help. An older child, parent, or aide takes a small

group of children for a short time every day, if possible. Each group chooses a game to play-- CANDY LAND, DON'T SPILL THE BEANS, BREAK THE ICE, SORRY, WAR (the card game), TIDDLE WINKS, PICK UP STICKS, GUESS WHO, and marble games can be used. It is vital, before beginning the game, for one of the players to read the rules so that every player will know what they are. To play the game in a fair way, all players must follow the rules and take a fair turn. Someone will win. For the disappointed child, a reminder that the next time the game is played he might be the winner is all that is necessary.

As the children begin to realize that rules have value--games cannot be played without rules that all players must adhere to--the value of classroom rules is reenforced. Children begin to interact with one another by using these rules--helping each other remember the class rules.

Intervention is another of the techniques to help children learn the language and the strategies important to positive peer interaction. When there is a conflict between children, the teacher intervenes to show the parties involved ways that will work in settling arguments--alternatives to physical actions.

"I don't like the way your sharing the blocks." "Please, may I trade some of my small blocks for some of your bigger ones that I need for the garage I'm making?" These are simple sentences that children need to know about. These are ways that give them the strategies to get what they want and to do it in a fair manner.

"He hit me first." This can be resolved with language interaction, instead of using physical reprisals. The "hit" that brought about the confrontation usually was an accidental bump. Making a statement about the stiuation first--"That hurts. I feel badly that you hit me."--gives both children involved the opportunity to settle the would-be conflict quickly and painlessly. Everyone is satisfied. These accidents are resolved with, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bump you."

The other technique for showing children alternative, positive behaviors is to dramatize--to exaggerate--a typical situation and then to have a class meeting to talk about ways of handling the problem. Examples, such as wrong behavior while riding the bus can be demonstrated. After the class discusses the best way to behave on the bus, class members take turns dictating bus rules. The teacher writes them down--again, as the children dictate them--and makes copies for each child to take home. Parents are asked to go over the rules at home with their child and to read the rules with him.

When Tim painted Cindy's face green, the class cheered. Cindy had been antagonizing Tim. She had her own container of paint, but pestered him relentlessly to give her his paint. Repeatedly, he told her, "You have your own paint and I don't like the way you acting. Leave me alone." She refused to stop. Tim, who had begun school with only one way of acting if he were mad--hitting anyone and anything as hard as he could--quietly reached over and painted Condy's face

green. He had come a long in his understanding of his own feelings and in learning alternate atrategies in dealing with offensive situations. Several months earlier, Tim would have settled he dispute with his fists. Cindy would have been hurt and lying on the floor in tears.

When Ginny announced that she felt the class should have a meeting because the children were not being very nice to Charlie, the new boy who had come to class for the first time that day, the teacher and the children sat in the circle and Ginny explained her feelings.

"I remember how I felt when I was the new kid and I came here for the first time. That was a long time ago but I remember how kids didn't talk to me. Charlie is new today and we are not being very nice to him and talking to him. That makes me feel badly. I think we should be extra nice to him because he feels sad that he had to leave his old school and move here where he's got no friends."

Ginny sat down. There was silence for a moment than the children began to talk about how they felt when they were the "new kid" somewhere. From that time on, everyone tried to remember to treat new kids just like they did their old friends.

The teacher did not tell them. The teacher did not have have to remind them. They undertstood because what they had learned came out of their own experiences--out of their own needs. Each of the children took a giant stride toward beginning a more responsible, caring human being that day--and every day that followed. This was positive peer

interaction--the kind that grews and continues to grow stronger from the inside out, whether or not the teacher is present or down the hall.

Positive peer interaction evolves slowly, as the child develops the language skills, the self-confidence, and the alternative strategies for interacting with others. It requires time, patience and understanding on the part of the teacher. Children should be allowed the time they need. When they have the language skills and the strategies for positive interaction, they have a tool for communicating and for learning.

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